

**FRANKLIN TOWN COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
June 17, 2020**

A meeting of the Town Council was held on Wednesday, June 17, 2020, at Franklin High School Football Field, Pisini Stadium, Oak Street, Franklin, MA. Councilors present: Andrew Bissanti, Brian Chandler, Robert Dellorco, Eamon McCarthy Earls, Melanie Hamblen, Glenn Jones, Matthew Kelly, Thomas Mercer; Deborah Pellegrini. Councilors absent: None. Administrative personnel in attendance: Jamie Hellen, Town Administrator; Mark Cerel, Town Attorney; Chrissy Whelton, Assistant to the Town Administrator.

CALL TO ORDER: ► Chair Mercer called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM. ► Chair Mercer called for a moment of silence and the Pledge of Allegiance.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: ► Chair Mercer stated this meeting is being recorded by *Franklin TV* and available for viewing on Comcast Channel 11 and Verizon Channel 29; this meeting may also be recorded by others.

CITIZEN COMMENTS: None.

Chair Mercer gave remarks regarding the choosing of the location for this meeting. He discussed that based on the budget challenges, the entire Town Council supports looking at an override as an option to solve the projected shortfalls. He stated the Town Council is committed to ensuring that the citizens of the community know what it will take to continue to provide the education and municipal services that all in Franklin have come to rely on. He noted that Franklin has had the second lowest COVID-19 infection rate for all communities with over 30,000 population. He thanked Town staff and community members for all they have done over the past four months to help the community stay safe. He reviewed the budget hearing process.

HEARINGS: 7:10pm. ► *FY 2021 Budget Hearing.*

► Mr. Jones read each *Town of Franklin Operating Budget FY 2021 Voting Document* line item.

► Hold on Line Item 123: Town Administrator. ■ Chair Mercer stated he held this item in order to introduce the staff in the Town Administrator's office: Mark Cerel, Town Attorney; Chrissy Whelton, Assistant to the Town Administrator; Alecia Alleyne, Administrative Assistant; Anne Marie Tracey, Marketing and Communication Specialist. He noted the Town Administrator's budget has been reduced over the past two years as the office has been restructured. He thanked all those in the office for a job well done during the COVID-19 crisis. ■ Ms. Pellegrini asked Ms. Tracey what she has been doing during the past year. ■ Mr. Hellen stated this is a new position that has been added with the School Department. Ms. Tracey has helped to bolster the outreach and social media for the Town. He said there is \$10,000 for marketing expenses. He stated that he anticipated the market analysis and business development study being completed sooner. It will give a blueprint to go forward on how to brand the community and how to do outreach to attract more commercial business. He is hopeful the study will be presented in July to the Town Council. He explained that there is value in Ms. Tracey's work through outreach presentations and social media. A big reason she was hired was to do more business development and marketing. ■ Ms. Tracey stated that for the past 10.5 months the majority of her work has been relationship building with people she needed to get to know and learning about needs in the Town. She has done website work and

social media work for both Town and Schools to serve the community in ways they expect in 2020. She stated that she has done lots of graphic work for various departments. She has been doing research on where the Town needs to go and develop a plan to move Franklin in the right direction. ■Mr. Jones stated he had put forth the need to hire for this position; this position supports the whole community to improve communication.

► Hold on Line Item 141: Board of Assessors. ■Ms. Pellegrini asked about the increase in this budget. ■Mr. Hellen stated the main change is a staffing model change. An employee in the department retired last year; instead of replacing that job, they hired a full-time assessor. He explained the importance of appraisers and noted that more revenue will be made for the whole Town based on that position.

► Hold on Line Item 152: Human Resources. ■Mr. Chandler stated everyone is looking to find ways to save money. He asked what the Town pays for employee benefits for health insurance. ■Ms. Karen Bratt, Human Resources Director, said that for the most common HMO plan it is about \$7,100 for individual, \$18,000 for family. Mr. Chandler asked if the Town could pay a stipend to get people to not use the Town's health insurance plan. Ms. Bratt said this has been considered. The Town has not decided to do that yet, but it is something that could be considered. ■Mr. Dellorco reviewed how Massport handles reimbursements for people who do not take the insurance plan.

► Hold on Line Item 192: Public Property & Buildings. ■Chair Mercer noted all the disinfecting efforts done by the Facilities Department to keep employees and first responders safe during this pandemic crisis. He noted the recommendation to reduce the Facilities budget by approximately \$541,000 this year. He asked what impact this reduction will have on the department for Town facilities and the schools. ■Mr. Michael D'Angelo, Director of Public Facilities, stated they had to look at the reality of the COVID crisis. He stated the budget reduction would reduce Library and Senior Center cleaning, money was taken out of Davis Thayer School with the expectation that it may not open, outside contractors such as electrical and plumbing were cut, and the water budget for watering the fields was cut. ■Chair Mercer asked what it would be like if they had to cut further into the budget related to schools and Town buildings. ■Mr. D'Angelo stated if further cuts are needed, he does not recommend cuts to custodial because of the current crisis; they are needed to clean, sanitize, and keep people and Town staff safe. Every dollar cut in maintenance will cost three more dollars in the future when something must be fixed. ■Mr. Kelly discussed the sanitizing machines that Mr. D'Angelo purchased in November before the COVID crisis and thanked him for his proactiveness. ■Mr. Jones thanked Mr. D'Angelo and his staff for all they have done to keep everyone safe during this COVID crisis. ■Mr. Dellorco agreed with Mr. Kelly and Mr. Jones and stated he appreciated the work of Mr. D'Angelo and his staff. ■Mr. Chandler confirmed \$82,000 was cut from the Davis Thayer School budget. ■Mr. Richard Ciccone, 185 Chestnut Street, asked if in this budget the finances for the outside HVAC company working in the schools and the electrical contractor Jasco are reflected. ■Mr. Hellen stated those services will be reduced in this budget by \$23,525. Those line items were cut by more than 50 percent. ■Mr. Ciccone asked what those two companies were paid last year. ■Mr. Hellen stated that every contractor cannot be cut. The staff cannot absorb all the work the contractors have done for 1.3 million sq. ft. of buildings. ■Chair Mercer requested that Mr. Hellen provide the amount paid last year and the amount in this year's budget for HVAC and Jasco at tomorrow night's meeting.

► Hold on Line Item 210: Police. ■Chair Mercer thanked the Police Chief and all officers for the work they have done during the COVID crisis. ■Police Chief Thomas Lynch stated that in the current budget there is no additional staff or programs being added. He reviewed the current staffing and work schedule rotation of the officers. He provided an overview of the changes made in the department including the

new shift schedule to save overtime hours. He reviewed the MECC Dispatch Center and the department's therapy dog Ben Franklin. He reviewed some grants received by the Police Department. ■Mr. Dellorco confirmed there were 52 officers. ■Chief Lynch stated that based on the average number of police officers in towns with similar populations, Franklin should have about six more officers. ■Mr. Chandler asked about the line items for meeting and conferences for \$18,000 and stipends for \$22,000. ■Chief Lynch stated the title should be changed for this expense line; it is money used to pay tuition for training. He explained the increase in stipends.

► Hold on Line Item 220: Fire. ■Chair Mercer thanked Chief McLaughlin for a great first year on the job. He asked the Chief to discuss the reforms and changes in the Fire Department and how this budget will meet the current and future needs of the community. ■Fire Chief James McLaughlin stated they did a restructuring of the Fire Department which included four new staff members. He stated they got out of Civil Service. They increased rescue billing effective April 1, 2020. The department received the ISO rating of 2; they are working toward a rating of 1. He discussed some of the initiatives they have worked on. They have formed a voluntary grant committee to seek out available grants. He stated there are 52 members of the Fire Department staff with one administrative assistant. He stated that his department has done a great job during the COVID crisis. ■Chair Mercer commended the Chief and the Fire Department staff. ■Mr. Kelly asked about rescue billing. ■Chief McLaughlin stated they increased their rates in April; they are at the average of the surrounding communities. As of today, they are over \$100,000 more than at this time last year. He said at this point in time, based on the run volume, he does not see a need for another ambulance. ■Mr. Chandler asked about the line item of meetings and conferences for \$40,000. ■Chief McLaughlin explained this was for training and recertification fees. ■Mr. Dellorco asked if they were at the correct staffing based on the town's population. ■Chief McLaughlin stated that with the four new officers, they are about at the right number. ■Ms. Hamblen asked for clarification regarding the four new hires to be hired in January. ■Chief McLaughlin explained that they could go for three full years with salary and benefits covered. ■Mr. Jones complimented the fire, paramedics, and police for how they have been working and the efficiencies they have made.

► Hold on Line Item 225: Regional Dispatch. ■Mr. Hellen stated this past year Franklin became part of a regional dispatch center. Franklin is currently in a district with Norfolk, Plainville, and Wrentham. The State 911 Department reached out to the MECC to discuss the addition of Mendon and Millville. He discussed a four-year grant program. He explained that for years one and two, there will not be any assessment costs. He stated that with some of the savings through the program they are going to create a stabilization fund to put aside the funds to cover the full costs beginning 2025. He stated that he expects that on July 1, 2020, the State will award a grant to Franklin which will save \$1.2 million. ■Mr. Dellorco asked how is the response time. ■Mr. Hellen stated it has improved quite a bit.

► Hold on Line Item 300: Franklin Public Schools. ■Chair Mercer thanked the School Department, School Committee, superintendent, and her staff for their heroic work over the past four months to transition to a remote learning environment so quickly. He explained the Town Council's role in the School Department budget and noted that the Town Council does not have any line item control on the School Department's budget. He asked about a facilities analysis study of all of the schools regarding space capacity. ■Superintendent of Schools Sara Ahern stated the facilities analysis study was initiated regarding the closing of Davis Thayer School. It looks at all of the facilities in Franklin Public Schools. The study is underway and a final report is in process. Some preliminary findings were presented in early May. No final recommendations are available at this time regarding if Davis Thayer will be closed in the fall. ■Chair Mercer stated enrollment in Franklin Public Schools has been on a decline for a decade for a drop of 1,173 students to date since 2008. A 2020 study showed a projection of an additional drop of 649

students by 2026/2027. He stated Keller Sullivan School is only 59 percent full. By 2030 it will be only half full. He asked how the school district is addressing this trend. ■Dr. Ahern said enrollment has decreased. The decrease is going to be felt more significantly at the high school. She said they anticipate they will look at enrollment across all schools that the School Committee will make considerations based on the study results. She agreed that enrollment needs a long-term focus. She stated this situation is being experienced in many Massachusetts communities as birth rates are down. ■Chair Mercer stated that COVID-19 poses many questions. He noted it is a School Committee decision to close Davis Thayer. He noted Town Council members have received many emails from residents about Davis Thayer. He stated that around \$1 million could be saved if Davis Thayer were closed. Regarding enrollment, he stated there are six elementary schools in Franklin with currently 540 open seats. If Davis Thayer is removed and those pupils are put into another school, there would still be 254 open seats in Franklin's elementary schools. There are three middle schools. Currently, there are 921 open seats in middle schools. He asked if we should be looking at closing Davis Thayer and maybe another school rather than reducing programs. He asked if students will be back in the classrooms or doing remote learning in the fall. ■Dr. Ahern said she is waiting for guidance from the State for planning for the fall; the health data is going to drive this. She expects updated information during the summer; possibly there will be some kind of hybrid model for having a staggered schedule. She is hopeful to be back in some capacity in the fall; there will be a new normal. She discussed the possibility of a second wave of COVID and said they are making plans for remote learning, as well. ■Chair Mercer asked that when local aid is determined in the fall, what other cuts may have to be made. ■Dr. Ahern stated that non-professional personnel cuts have already been made and explained that making cuts during the school year is difficult. They are having further discussions based on the possibility of a 10 percent decrease in State aid. ■Chair Mercer asked Dr. Ahern to explain what is a reduction in force notice. ■Dr. Ahern said there is a statutory date of June 15th to put out such notices in order to achieve the budget number; they have hopes to be able to recall and reappoint those educators. ■Mr. Jones stated that he is an educator. He stated that teachers are not overpaid. It is one of the hardest jobs in this community. He commends educators for the work they have put into the remote learning. He has received emails from residents about a disproportionate cut to the arts programs. He asked about the 103 people who have been let go at this point. He would hate to see the arts programs go away. He asked about the unfunded mandates. ■Dr. Ahern stated that this is the first budget and they are anticipating talking about further reductions. The decisions were not made lightly. It does feel disproportionate because they are only part way through building the FY21 budget. She stated that they are working on quantifying the unfunded mandates at this time. One example of an unfunded mandate is substance abuse prevention and screening which the school counselors and nurses are doing; this takes time away from the staff that they were previously using to do something else. ■Mr. Chandler stated he has been asked many times about the closing of Davis Thayer and asked if it would save \$2.5 million. ■Dr. Ahern said they have not fleshed out the exact money savings for such a closing. She questioned what the impact of those reductions would be for the students regarding the instructional coaches and personalized learning that would be lost. ■Ms. Hamblen asked about the cost of out-of-district transportation. ■Dr. Ahern's staff member stated that the cost for 85 students to be transported out of district is about \$1.3 million; this is a contracted service which is in the budget and is mandated. ■Ms. Pellegrini stated that closing a school happens. Davis Thayer has 227 students; those students could be moved to Keller Sullivan School without any redistricting. She is disappointed the analysis report is not ready at this time. Closing David Thayer would save \$1.5 million; this savings would make the budget process easier. She stated that they do not want to see salaries have a freeze. ■Mr. Kelly asked about the completion of the report. The report was supposed to be done in April. What is the recommendation that Dr. Ahern has seen in the drafts? He asked why the principal left a few months ago, but a principal search was just started. ■Dr. Ahern said it was difficult to work remotely to provide the information for the study to the architect. She said she wants the report to be accurate and thorough. There are components of the

report she would like to see more fully developed. It is coming along. Part of the report has been paid for. A hard deadline for the report has not been given. She said there is data in the early reports that represent consolidating schools. She stated that any layoffs would be something to review and address to make a determination. An interim principal is being searched for at this time; she said it is not a full search. She said there were delays in many things that they have done due to COVID-19. ■Mr. Kelly noted that 103 teachers were eliminated. He stated that music seems to be targeted and asked why not athletics or the administration. ■Dr. Ahern said she knows that it seems like music has been targeted, but she tried to already explain this. She discussed COVID-19 and the virus droplets related to singing which relate to the chorus regarding health and safety. She is looking at athletic adjustments. In terms of administration, there is a misconception that this was not part of the reduction. She stated that laying off 103 non-professional status teachers was to buy time. She laid off 1.5 people in her office. She said they are planning to recall a lot of the teachers who were laid off. She said that fee increases for athletics is not one of the current recommendations. ■Mr. Kelly asked why Dr. Ahern did not talk about redistricting especially if a school is going to close. He noted previous budget cuts and asked if Dr. Ahern and her administration were willing to not take a raise to save teaching positions. ■Dr. Ahern said redistricting can be very disruptive. She said her raise is still to be determined between her and the School Committee. ■Mr. Earls asked when would the laid off teachers be notified about rehiring. He asked about special education requirements. ■Dr. Ahern said they are working on the first round of people to bring back and will know probably next week. They want to bring back the people they know they need. ■Mr. Bissanti said he does not understand what is taking so long for the architect's review; answers are needed. That building cannot house children. Difficult decisions need to be made. ■Mr. Dellorco stated agreement with Mr. Kelly and said if we have to redistrict and close the school, it should be done all at once. ■Chair Mercer stated that regarding unfunded mandates, the State is talking about maybe mandating that the School Department provide PPE for each student for each day. He asked where this money would come from and noted that COVID-19 is adding so much to an already difficult budget. He applauded Dr. Ahern's efforts. ■Dr. Ahern said that it is thought that the State would say the students would bring their own PPE and the schools would provide backups. The schools would have to provide PPE for faculty and staff. The cost would be about \$500 per student resulting in \$2.5 million for Franklin. She noted there is CARES funding. ■Ms. Deborah Ryan, 4 Symmes Road, discussed the importance of the music program and music related activities. She noted students have shared how important the Franklin music program is to them. She said music has become a way for students to find their voice and express themselves. She requested that a core aspect of music remains and not be cut. ■Heather of Downingwood Drive said she is part of a group of 1,000 concerned voters worried and frazzled at the loss of 103 teachers and significant cuts to the music program. She explained the two meetings this group has had. She said she has spoken with Mr. Hellen, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Jeff Roy, and others. She stated that not all Town Council members had questions for fire and police departments, but had many questions for the school side. She encouraged the Town Council members to get together with residents and learn a little more about the schools. ■Mr. Timothy Keenan, 6 Winthrop Drive, stated he is a first-time member of School Committee. He has learned a lot in the past year and believes the schools need a lot more money. He said 75 percent of school districts in Massachusetts are spending more than Franklin on a per pupil basis; this is a problem worth solving. He does not like to see 103 teachers cut and the music program. He said the funding issue must be solved. ■Ms. Anne Bergen, 16 Peters Lane, stated this has been a long-term problem. She noted Norwood just had an override where 70 percent of the people voted for it; people came together in the community. She stated that we have to intervene much earlier in the lives of children to address mental health issues; this has to be done as a community. The schools need the money for this; we want our kids to be able to compete with those from all other schools.

CITIZENS COMMENTS ON BUDGET LINE ITEMS NOT HELD: None.

► Chair Mercer stated this would be a good place to stop tonight's meeting and continue the public hearing tomorrow night. He thanked everyone who attended tonight's meeting. He stated that it is important for the community to understand the issues facing the Town; we need to work together to combat this problem and deal with the issues facing us in this budget and the next few budgets.

The following line items were Held; they will be continued to tomorrow night's public hearing.

- Hold on Line Item 422: DPW-Highway.
- Hold on Line Item 422: DPW-Park & Tree.
- Hold on Line Item 422: DPW-Recycling.
- Hold on Line Item 422: DPW-Administration.
- Hold on Line Item 510: Board of Health.
- Hold on Line Item 630: Recreation.
- Hold on Line Item 710: Debt Service-Principal.
- Hold on Line Item 434: Solid Waste Budget.
- Hold on Line Item 440: Sewer.
- Hold on Line Item 450: Water Budget.

COUNCIL COMMENTS: None.

ADJOURN: ► MOTION to Adjourn by Kelly. SECOND by Hamblen. No Discussion. ► VOTE: Yes-9, No-0, Absent-0. Meeting adjourned at 10:14 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Judith Lizardi
Recording Secretary